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ABSTRACT

The world of work has changed dramatically over the years. Many researchers have enhanced career development theories, and recently there have been efforts to explore the possible convergence of the major theories or, at least, more effectively bridge theory and practice. This document explains several theories that can be used to revise current theory. The theories include planned happenstance; activeness, reactiveness, and flexibility; career adaptability; meandering and maneuvering; scenario planning; and career responsiveness. Career development theory may primarily be about how counselors prepare clients for the unexpected aspects of their career journey. Career responsiveness may be the term that best fits these emerging career development theories and a metaphor is presented to illustrate an understanding of this term. (Contains 23 references.) (JDM)

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Planning for Serendipity? Career Management for Changing Times

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INTRODUCTION

The world of work has changed dramatically since Parsons (1909) first introduced his trait-factor theory of vocational choice in the early 1900s. Over the years, many researchers have enhanced career development theory; recently there have been efforts to explore the possible convergence of the major theories (Savickas and Lent 1994) or, at least, more effectively bridging theory and practice (Savickas and Walsh 1996). Increasingly, career practitioners and theorists alike are looking to general counselling theory, and even other disciplines, to inform their thinking about careers in the changing world of work (Watts 1996). Some lament that "career development theory [has] very little practical usefulness for career counselors" (Mitchell and Krumboltz 1996, 233).

THE CHANGING WORLD OF WORK

What changes have shaken the very foundation of career development theory? The subject is so complex and important that the American Psychological Association has recently published an entire book entitled *The New Organizational Reality* (Gowing, Kraft, and Quick 1998). The editors tell us that "[t]he hallmark of the new organizational reality is change" (xv) and describe both the downside of change (rigidity, defensiveness, and decreased productivity) and the upside (opportunities to learn, grow, and develop). There are dramatic changes in the kinds of work that people do, the way that they do work, the structure of organizations, and the psychological contract of employment (Blustein 1997). An effective theory of career development for today, then, must surely address the issue of change.

IS A THEORY OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT NECESSARY?

Is it better, however, for career counsellors and scholars to devote time and energy to improving career development theory, or should they instead focus on the more general theories that inform us about coping with stress and change? Savickas (1996) warns that "whereas theory can be partial, practice must be holistic. Clients who present career problems cannot isolate their career problems from their other life issues" (192–93). Richardson (1996) cautions about "false splits" between

personal and career counselling. She advocates a holistic approach, preferring to define her work as counselling first, giving secondary importance to career specialization (and potentially combining it with other speciality areas).

Career practitioners, therefore, need a solid grounding in general counselling theories and skills—and must continue to build on them as well as draw from emerging counselling theories, to further their professional development. On the other hand, career counsellors work with clients in a specific context—the changing world of work—and so need relevant theories, tools, and techniques to help with the unique counselling problems that their clients bring. Lucas (1996), in describing the existing body of career research, makes the criticism that "[r]esearch in our journals tends to answer many questions but few that are asked by practitioners in their offices" (81).

Given that a general goal for career counselling is to "promote and facilitate satisfying and realistic decision making and career adjustment throughout the life span" (Hackett and Lonborg 1994, 44), career counsellors, more than other counsellors, need special knowledge about the changing world of work (e.g., demographic trends, labour market information, employer expectations, employability skills, and specific career resources and career assessment tools) (Hall and Moss 1998). Some of this knowledge will come from literature in fields outside of counselling (Kline and Rowe 1998). Career counsellors also need to be aware of the issues unique to special client groups (displaced executives, high potential managers, blue collar workers, vocational rehabilitation clients, retirees, or immigrants, to name a few). As well, career counselling has traditionally assisted with times of transition (e.g., leaving school, after job loss, prior to career change, or as part of rehabilitation). Career counsellors, therefore, need a special understanding of the issues that clients face during such transitions, as well as an awareness of the differences between voluntary and involuntary transitions, and the unique stresses caused by sudden or sustained and gradual change. In an age where knowledge is increasing exponentially, there is clearly a need for career counselling specialists. Such specialists would supplement their solid grounding in general counselling skills and theory with advanced knowledge and expertise in one or more of the career-related issues.

In times of rapid, transformational change we need theories that are fluid—theories that allow us to formulate career problems within a manageable framework, yet flexible enough to encompass the diversity of problems that individuals encounter in today's world of work. A good career development theory, then, will guide or inform the practice of counsellors so that they can select appropriate interventions, yet it will not be so highly prescriptive that the counsellor's creativity and intuition is overpowered.

Of the major career development theories today, perhaps Super's "life-span, life-space" theory (Super, Savickas, and Super 1996), is one of the better examples of good theory according to these criteria. In Super's (1942) early work, he was interested in extending vocational theory to better assist counsellors as they encountered a range of vocational problems with clients in diverse life stages and roles. His developmental theory continued to evolve to keep pace with the changing world of work. One later addition, for example, was to recognize the mini-cycles that people go through when their careers are disrupted and their normal developmental pattern is breached (Super, Savickas, and Super 1996). However, even Super recognized that his theory was neither unified nor comprehensive; rather, it remained "segmental"—comprising an assortment of theories dealing with various aspects of career development. Super was one of the initiators of the conference on convergence in career theory (Savickas 1997).

The recent work of Krumboltz and his associates (Mitchell, Levin, and Krumboltz 1999) moves us closer to a unified theory of career development. Like Super, Krumboltz has continued to extend his theory to keep up with the practical needs of counsellors (Mitchell and Krumboltz 1996). While not prescriptive, "planned happenstance" theory (which grew out of the learning theory of career counselling, in turn an expansion of the social learning theory of career decision-making) is meant to provide a framework for counsellor thinking that encompasses the realities faced by our clients in today's rapidly changing, often unpredictable world of work (Mitchell, Levin, and Krumboltz 1999). Even before this latest evolution of Krumboltz's theory, Brown (1996) praised Krumboltz's work for its application to practice. Interestingly, Savickas's (1997) extension of Super's life-span, life-space theory—focusing on "adaptability" as the integrating construct—bears significant resemblance to Krumboltz's latest efforts. Watts (1996), too,

addresses similar issues when he refers to "planful serendipity" (46).

Emerging directions for career development theory

Despite the unsuccessful formal attempts at convergence, then, it seems that scholars reflecting on the necessary changes to career development theory are converging on the notion of "planful serendipity" as a bridging construct. In this section, I will briefly review some of the theories that incorporate this notion and offer some metaphors as illustrations.

Planned happenstance theory

Useful career development theories need to account for planfulness and self-management as well as serendipity and external forces of change. Planned happenstance theory (Mitchell, Levin and Krumboltz 1999), an extension of the learning theory of career counselling (Mitchell and Krumboltz 1996), meets both criteria. In planned happenstance theory, counsellors are challenged to recognize unplanned, serendipitous events as both inevitable and desirable. Clients are encouraged to take planful action to generate and discover new opportunities for learning.

Activeness, reactiveness and flexibility

The theory of work adjustment (Dawis 1996) includes two personal style dimensions that fit with planful serendipity—*activeness* and *reactiveness*—and another one, *flexibility*, that fits with Savickas's (1997) notion of career adaptability. An active approach to career management is more planful and purposeful and can result in a change in environment (e.g., quitting a job or starting a business). A reactive approach, on the other hand, is induced by the environment (e.g., a layoff or a serendipitous meeting that results in a job offer). More flexible workers find it easier to cope with change.

Career adaptability

Savickas (1997) offers the construct of "career adaptability" as a way to unify Super's segmented life-span, life-space theory of career development (Super, Savickas, and Super 1996). For him, adaptability uses the same developmental dimensions as "career maturity"—planning, exploring, and deciding. Thus, adaptability, clearly relevant for coping with serendipitous change, is strategically developed in a planful manner. The notion of career adaptability fits well with the literature on career resilience (Collard, Epperheimer, and Saign 1996; Kidd 1998;

Waterman, Waterman, and Collard 1994) and also with Csikszentmihalyi's "flow" theory (1990, 1997).

Meandering and manoeuvring

Lynne Bezanson, executive director of the Canadian Career Development Foundation, has described career paths as "meandering"—resembling more a forest path or river than a linear, upwardly mobile course (Alberta Advanced Education and Career Development 1999, 1). Other theorists warn, however, that meandering is not sufficient (Mitchell, Levin, and Krumboltz 1999). The notion of career building as "manoeuvring" adds a planful element (Alberta Advanced Education and Career Development 1999). Likely both meandering and manoeuvring are important career management strategies in times of rapid change. Perhaps a canoeing metaphor will help to illustrate the interdependence of these two constructs.

Sometimes career development resembles aimlessly canoeing down a river—meandering—with very little control or concern about where the currents take you, but always heading in the same general direction. A self-managed career, on the other hand, would be more like actively paddling the canoe, planful and purposeful—manoeuvring—choosing the best course, pausing at times, and changing speed and direction when desired. However, unexpected events befall even the most skilled canoeists. Perhaps the event is serendipitous—a chance encounter with a deer or discovery of a breathtaking waterfall (i.e., an unexpected, but positive, career opportunity). Sometimes, however, the event is frightening and overwhelming—a floodgate is unexpectedly opened and, depending on which side of the gate the canoe is, there will be either no water (i.e., job loss) or a tumultuous torrent (i.e., chaotic organizational change). Regardless of the kind of unexpected event, strong skills and a prepared mind will help with navigation.

Scenario planning

Dave Redekopp, a highly respected Canadian career consultant, first introduced me to the notion of "scenario planning" as used by Royal Dutch Shell to prepare for uncertain times (Wack 1985). Scenario planning fits well with planned happenstance theory (Mitchell, Levin, and Krumboltz 1999). Although the future is unknown, it can be rehearsed to a large degree —just as actors in theatre sports may rehearse strategies and techniques to equip them to handle the spontaneous demands that they will face while on stage. Such strategies allow us to help our clients

prepare for change—even change that is completely beyond individual control—by equipping them with fundamental principles for decision making, action planning, and adapting with flexibility to changing internal needs and environmental demands.

Just as one can prepare for the possibility of an earthquake, one can prepare for the possibility of job loss, corporate restructuring, or emerging skill requirements. Career counselling, therefore, is less like fortune-telling (we don't know if or when the earthquake will come) and more like emergency preparedness (we can equip our clients to handle whatever difficulties the earthquake might bring). Career development theory is essential in this regard. Just as geologists and seismologists can provide us with detailed earthquake scenarios derived from previous experience and solid scientific theory, so, too, can career development theorists equip us with an understanding of the most likely possibilities for our clients in the changing world of work.

Career responsiveness

A term that I think fits with these emerging career development theories is *career responsiveness.* As a descriptor of effective career management in times of dramatic change, career responsiveness incorporates many of the notions described above. To be responsive is to be proactive yet adaptable. I will offer a final metaphor to illustrate my understanding of this term.

At the top of Machu Picchu, in Peru, is an impressive Incan ruin—a popular tourist destination. But Machu Picchu is a very high mountain—so high, in fact, that most tourists would suffer from oxygen deprivation if they attempted to climb it. To accommodate these travellers, there is a train and a shuttle. Much of the trip, however, involves travelling horizontally across the mountain rather than up. The train travels a brief leg of the journey, then stops and repositions itself to move to the next stage. Some of the segments are short trips (much like contract positions); some are steep climbs (much like a promotion or intensive course of study). Other segments may involve a brief downward journey to find a better position from which to ascend to the next level (similar to downshifting or taking a demotion to get established in a new organization or industry). For the impatient traveller, it may seem that progress toward the top of the mountain is very slow or even non-existent. However, the journey has not involved aimless meandering.

Rather, there has been steady progress toward a goal, with course adjustments to manoeuvre around the obstacles encountered along the way. The journey was planned, but, to be successful, involved responding to the terrain. Having a guiding theory, therefore—similar to the well-worn tracks up Machu Picchu—will help us as career counsellors keep our clients on track as they progress toward their own visions of a fulfilling career.

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